

Two figures stand out as icons of Revolutionary communication and community. The first is Paul Revere, whose mythic midnight ride around the perimeters of Concord was a tale told and retold throughout the nineteenth century, long before Longfellow set down his famous ballad about it in 1860. The other is Thomas Paine, whose 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* remains, from grade school to graduate school, the representative artifact of Revolutionary print diffusion, widely cited as the first American bestseller. Taken together, these two figures pose a question for early American studies in terms that the field is likely to recognize as institutionally paradigmatic: Is it possible to locate the priority of either oral or print culture, of local versus national community, in the making of early America? And are these two narratives as mutually exclusive as they might at first seem?¹

The story of Paul Revere looks backward. There is something of the frontier in the way he leaps onto his horse to vocally spread the word of an impending British invasion. Even though Concord was a busy suburb of Boston, the story describes a sleepy village, where the lanterns in the steeple across the water and an old mare are the only means of communication in a primitive but resourceful patriot network. Even in the twentieth century, revisionist accounts retell the story with these basic components intact. The American regionalist painter Grant Wood, for instance, gently satirized Revere's folk status in his 1931 painting *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. The painting evokes, through a series of comically repetitive circles, the seasonal circularity of rural New England life and its relative enclosure from the

outside world. These circles, set in overstated contrast to the painting's blocky, dollhouse homesteads and the church's pen-like steeple, mimic the oral origins of the myth: from Revere's mouth, then mouth-to-mouth among the local villagers, then from colony to colony and from one generation to the next, recited and retold, across time and space, until the tale comes ironically to rest on the fixed and silent canvas.

The Revere myth is about the grassroots, or local, moment of collective resistance and founding, but Paine's *Common Sense* imagines its intended territories on a much grander scale. Paul Revere spread the Revolutionary gospel in one county on one night, but *Common Sense* proselytized an entire continent. The myth of Paul Revere inheres in his local person, the labor of his body, but the legend of *Common Sense* has overvaulted its maker, and Paine himself is hardly mentioned in historiographic accounts of the pamphlet's success. Paul Revere evokes a nostalgic scene of premarket village life, but the storied success of *Common Sense* suggests that the future is already present in the form of a technologically advanced confederation efficiently linked across vast distances by a well-developed print network. Revere's message, transmitted face-to-face (or mouth-to-ear), is a kind of gossip-writ-large, but Paine's printed manifesto is the epitome of both an eighteenth-century republic of letters and the wide, nationalizing berth of print culture that is now routinely assumed by scholars of early American culture.²

I want to scrutinize here the second of these two legends, reading the Paine legend of universal diffusion from within a materialist account of the actual production and dissemination of *Common Sense* over the land mass of the early United States. No other printed text has garnered as much responsibility for inciting American nationalism, yet the history of *Common Sense* as a material text has been largely ignored.³ My work here begins to fill this gap, but I also recognize that a material examination of the early American book trade cannot by itself account for the myth of *Common Sense* or for its attendant myths of early national consensus and connection via the technological magic of early American print culture. Meredith McGill has recently argued that the "culture of reprinting" in the 1830s has been obscured by our tendency, in literary studies, to isolate and elevate authors as the meaning-making focus of our study; here I will argue that the fragmentary, chaotic culture of Revolutionary reprinting has not only been

obscured but also repressed—forgotten in favor not of a monolithic Great Author but of a Great Text, a Great People, and a Great Nation—in favor, in short, of a coherent and legitimate scene of founding.⁴

Common Sense was an unprecedented call to nationalism, and it was widely read. But it was neither as widely produced nor as widely consumed as rumor has it. Indeed, this particular narrative of origin has always been a populist fantasy, for the Revolution was powered by a far more limited consensus than this myth can ever acknowledge. Revolutionary consensus was never contained in or expressed by sophisticated communal structures (such as a strongly linked print network and the roads, boats, stages, and canals that would make such a community possible); revolutionary community was, on the contrary, pieced together in distinctive (and at times conflicting) ways in the many local worlds that comprised it. In the post-Revolutionary era, this patchwork of shifting locales (inscribed, with some additions and deletions, into a lasting union by the Constitution of 1787) has been read retroactively as the sign of universal consent. But the Revolution, as well as the people and the nation it subsequently produced, was never a univocal phenomenon, any more than Paine's pamphlet could have been universally diffused.

Considered as an episode in material history, the idea of hundreds of thousands of printed pamphlets circulating uniformly across the disjointed fringe of the eighteenth-century British empire appears more than a little unlikely. Nevertheless, the Paineite myth of mass diffusion is a powerful Enlightenment metanarrative that we continue to consume in early American studies, one in which the practices of book-making and nation building continue to be imagined as inseparable practices. To the degree that we continue to uphold this master narrative, we remain the objects of the Enlightenment rather than its critics. In offering a material history of one its foundational texts, then, I am also offering a critique of the American Enlightenment—and of the Revolution and the nation it produced. When *Common Sense*'s heterogeneous material history is reconstructed, the Revolution comes more clearly into view not so much as an occasion in which democratically mobilized populations erected new political and cultural forms on top of older, more elite forms but as a place where the necessary persistence of such older forms has simply required special myths to disguise them. And those myths, more often than not, happen to come in the shape of a book.

The Cult of *Common Sense*

In 1993, historian Howard Zinn called *Common Sense* “perhaps the most important publication in the history of the United States.” Noting that Paine’s pamphlet “went through twenty five editions” in 1776 and “sold hundreds of thousands of copies,” Zinn dubs it “the best of best sellers.”⁵

This story has been intact for well over a hundred years. Consider Henry Cabot Lodge’s 1898 *The Story of the Revolution*, in which Lodge, like so many late-nineteenth-century historians, explicitly connects the onset of American independence to the mythic impact of *Common Sense*:

[T]he pamphlet went far and wide with magical rapidity. It appeared in every form, and was reprinted and sold in every colony and town of the Atlantic seaboard. Presently it crossed the ocean, was translated into French, and touched with unshrinking hands certain chords in the Old World long silent but now beginning to quiver into life. In the colonies alone it is said that one hundred and twenty thousand copies were sold in three months. This means that almost every American able to read, had read “Common Sense.”⁶

Lodge cedes a tremendous agency here not to Paine but to the pamphlet, making the book itself seem to take over every aspect of its own production and dissemination. In this account, as in numerous other histories of the Revolution, *Common Sense* (the thing) is syntactically in charge, a grammatical as well as historical agent that “went” on unheard-of travels, apparently of its own accord. People are not responsible for carrying the book across the continent in this account or for choosing how and when it would be presented to readers; it simply “appeared” in multiple forms, “cross[ing] the ocean” and “touch[ing]” all of Europe with its own “hands.” In foregrounding what he calls the “magical” agency of the book, Lodge makes impossible any emphasis on human agents or historical actors, who are negatively registered only by the logic of the numerous passive verbs that have no agent attached to them—not even in the form of grammatical objects. Who did the considerable work of reprinting *Common Sense* when, as Lodge tells us, “it was reprinted”? Who did the translating when it “was translated”? Who was it that “said” that “one hundred and twenty thousand copies were sold in three months”? And who was responsible for selling them when they “were sold”? On the material mechanisms of pro-

duction and dissemination that underwrote the “magical rapidity” of *Common Sense*’s success, Lodge is silent.

This story of the Revolution does more, however, than reiterate a common myth about what *Common Sense* was and meant. It also reifies, through the trope of this one pamphlet’s ubiquitous dissemination, our mythic national conception of the Revolution and of founding itself as a text-driven phenomenon. Not only is a printed text given magical agency in such a way that it elides the social forces that would seem to make it possible—printers, booksellers, cart haulers, and ferrymen, all at work in a world of frozen ports, icy rivers, muddy roads, barter relations, and illiteracy—but the very “magic” of the book’s widespread dissemination produces the new, nationally affiliated subject: “Americans.” These Americans emerge simultaneously in Lodge’s account both as readers of Paine’s pamphlet and as political entities, as if the figure of the book itself could hail its Revolutionary audience into being at the very moment of contact. Paine’s pamphlet thus performs the act of popular founding, turning North American colonials into American nationals through the mobilization of a massive reading community that becomes, in this most Whiggish interpretation of American history, the basis of Revolutionary consensus.⁷

Revising Lodge’s account, however, is not that easy, for the myth of *Common Sense* has some basis in fact. Paine’s pamphlet *was* an exception—what one bibliographer of eighteenth-century pamphlets calls “something of a freak.”⁸ At a time when political pamphlets had restricted geographical circulations, *Common Sense* was reprinted an unusual number of times and had a tremendous influence in (parts of) the colonies and Europe. A pamphlet like Thomas Jefferson’s *Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1775) had one modest printing in North America—as did each of James Otis’s supposedly influential essays. But *Common Sense* went through twenty-five American editions—almost twice as many as any other pamphlet of its time. Its closest runner-up would be Jonathon Shipley’s *Speech . . . on the Bill for Altering the Charters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay* (1774), now largely forgotten, with twelve American editions; a distant third would be John Dickinson’s *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, with seven.⁹ Indeed, *Common Sense* was reprinted so often that its publication history more nearly resembles that of a book produced in London than anything else produced in America until well into the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Lodge's account can, however, be clarified. While he's right about the pamphlet's unusual currency on the Atlantic seaboard, he exaggerates in saying that it "was reprinted and sold in every colony and town." In fact, the pamphlet with the reputation for having been everywhere at once was reprinted in fourteen towns in only seven of the thirteen colonies and not at all in those peripheral spaces called Canada, Vermont, Maine, and Florida or in the western hinterlands and frontiers—territories that in some cases lacked the same forms of provincial status that the North American colonies possessed but that nevertheless engaged in imperial debates and, in some cases, Revolutionary battles.¹¹ The pamphlet had its greatest impact in the northern colonies, particularly in areas like New England that had already been radicalized by military engagement with the British or in those, like Philadelphia, that had a willing and already highly politicized audience. Thus, while it was eventually reprinted (in either its entirety or in parts) in Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire, it was reprinted only once south of Philadelphia (in Charleston). And with the exception of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, every city in which it was reprinted lay directly on the King's post road, making its dissemination from printer to printer not, as Lodge suggests, "magical" but fairly mechanical and predictable.

While we have a reliable account of who reprinted *Common Sense* and where, it's much harder to know how many copies were printed and distributed. And yet in many accounts numbers are routinely cited—so often and so consistently that these figures have themselves become a persistent part of the Paine legend. The most repeated estimates range from 100,000 to 150,000, though they have at times inflated all the way up to the highly implausible number of half a million first invoked by Moncure Conway in his 1892 biography of Paine and later picked up wholesale by Philip Foner in his authoritative *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*.¹² In describing the pamphlet, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historians sometimes note the disjunction between a still-developing print culture and the pamphlet's phenomenal success. For most, however, this apparent contradiction merely proves the self-evident importance of the pamphlet, which, as in Lodge's account, is routinely cast as the syntactic agent of a host of Revolutionary actions. John Fiske, writing in 1896, references no source when he notes: "It was difficult for the printers, with the clumsy presses of that day, to bring out copies of 'Common

Sense' fast enough to meet the demand for it. More than a hundred thousand copies were speedily sold, and it carried conviction wherever it went."¹³

The numbers cited by these postbellum historians were retained throughout the twentieth century—but with a twist. Even claims to their unlikelihood gradually disappeared while attempts to link the phenomenon to the modern experience of the bestseller began to multiply. Thus, in 1946, W. E. Woodward kept the tale intact but extended it with a new topos—an analogy to modern sales figures. Calling *Common Sense* “the phenomenal ‘best seller’ of its time,” Woodward enlarged on an already large claim: “In three months one hundred thousand copies were sold. . . . This is equivalent to a sale of five million to-day, as our population is fifty times larger than it was then.”¹⁴ In 1950, Lynn Montross likewise valorized the pamphlet as a mathematical wonder, theorizing that “[b]efore the end of the year, 120,000 copies had come off the presses, establishing a record for a bestseller which has never been equaled in the history of American publishing. In order to reach the same proportions of the total population in the middle of the twentieth century, it would be necessary for a book to achieve a circulation of six million copies during its first year.”¹⁵

Such numerical insistence would be encouraging if it were not for the fact that these circulation numbers derive from that most unreliable of narrators—the author himself.¹⁶ In the most unstable moments of the early Revolution, as Washington lost battles and his armies scrambled for supplies, Paine began to speculate freely about the number of copies his pamphlet had sold. His earliest estimate comes in the dubious context of a newspaper debate with the anti-*Common Sense* editorialist Cato—a forum that would have inspired even a lesser polemicist than Paine to hyperbole. Writing under the pen name Forster on 8 April 1776—a few days *less* than three months after the pamphlet's publication—Paine responded to Cato's attack on his pamphlet by staking its virtue on its circulation: “I am certain,” he speculates, “that I am within compass when I say one hundred and twenty thousand” of the pamphlet have been sold.¹⁷ Three years later, in 1779, writing a semiprivate autobiographical account of himself for Charles Lee, Paine raised the overall number, writing that “the number of copies printed and sold in America was not short of 150,000,” making it “the greatest sale that any performance ever had since the use of letters.”¹⁸

History has picked up Paine's estimates wholesale, but none of them were based on actual knowledge. While Paine also claimed in *The Rights of Man* that he "gave the copy right to every state in the Union" (thus implying a working knowledge of when and where the pamphlet was published), we know that he had little to do with the dissemination of the pamphlet (other than a handful of copies that he carried with him to New York on a trip early in 1776).¹⁹ At no time was Paine or his original printer in contact with the printers across the colonies who set his pamphlet in type. Indeed, he jumbles the facts when he says he "gave the copy right" to the states. In fact, Paine had given the copyright not to the dispersed states but to that far more centralized entity, the Continental Congress, a sentimental act that was in itself somewhat meaningless, because there was no copyright law at the time. Ultimately, Paine could only have known of the success of his pamphlet the same way everyone else did—through the considerable word-of-mouth notoriety it generated in the circles in which he himself was physically moving.

Paine promoted the book, however, in spite of the limitations any particular perspective might have produced—including his own. Posing the pamphlet's dissemination as a vivid material extension of the continental union he was agitating for, he did what he could to confuse the book's alliance-building arguments with the scattered facts of everyday life. Paine may well have been the first author both to address every inhabitant of the colonies rhetorically and to believe (or to behave as if) he had actually succeeded. We, of course, should know better, though it remains tempting to say otherwise. Robert Middlekauff, for instance, simply reinscribes the myth of *Common Sense*'s impossibly ubiquitous distribution when he claims that "[s]ince the controversy involved the 'continent,' *Common Sense* was reprinted in all the major American cities and the minor ones as well."²⁰ What is more likely is that because "the controversy involved the 'continent,'" many colonists wanted to believe that its distribution was—or could be—continental as well. If dispersed North Americans could, as Paine had challenged his readers, "let [their] imaginations transport [them] . . . to Boston," then how hard could it be to get a few boxes of pamphlets there too?²¹

In the middle of January, it was hard to get anything from Philadelphia to British-occupied Boston, and there was certainly no precedent for the mass movement of large numbers of something as luxu-

rious as a printed text.²² Books were not yet objects that were being moved easily from colony to colony, and even the most established and ambitious colonial booksellers had long had to face two facts of American life that Paine, as a writer, could (and perhaps in this case had to) dismiss: the colonies' economic dependence on the British book trade and the problematic dispersion of colonial populations (would-be book buyers) across Paine's mythic continent. So splintered and embryonic was the American book trade at the moment of independence that James Gilreath has suggested that not one but "thirteen separate book cultures [existed] in the colonies" at this time.²³ Pamphlets like Paine's, if they circulated at all outside the local area that produced them, were distributed not in mass numbers but in single copies carried piecemeal here and there along the coastal post route and reprinted wherever they came to rest. In this highly localized economy, it was not political treatises—however timely—but almanacs that were the perfect bestsellers, "because their astronomical calculations pertained to the locale in which they would be used."²⁴

Common Sense's circulation numbers, posed by twentieth-century historians in the language of modern accounting, carry with them the objective force of the mathematical, but like accounting itself, they stand instead as relics of the cultures of production that made them. *Common Sense's* success was, in the end, produced in multiple locales, not just across differentiated space but across time as well, spanning generations of nation-building discourses. After Paine himself, the primary source for the account we now have is the emerging industry of historiography. First-generation historians of the Revolution like David Ramsey, Jonathon Bouchier, and Mercy Otis Warren favored speculative theses about the origins of things like resistance and consensus, and none of them mentions *Common Sense* as a decisive factor in the decision to separate from Britain. Second- and third-generation historians, however (such as Lodge), began to turn toward a newly accruing archive of official state papers, where the citation of contemporary political actors was gradually becoming a new standard in how history should be written.²⁵ Indeed, after 1820, the construction of such an archive became a primary concern of American historians. In 1822, Hezekiah Niles published the first extensive archival record of the Revolution with his *Principles and Acts of the Revolution in America*; in 1829–1830, Jared Sparks edited *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution*; in 1837 the first edition of the *Ameri-*

can Archives project appeared; and in the 1830s, Jonathan Elliot issued his collection of constitutional papers, *The Debates . . . on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, the authenticity of which continues to be debated.²⁶ By 1830, then, numerous multivolume documentary projects were well underway (even though many American archives had, ironically, to be repossessed from British keepers). From that time forward, textual sources (and textual origins) became the preferred mode in the retroactive production of early American history.²⁷ Thus was born and reared the cult of *Common Sense*.

Continental Drift

Though much has been claimed for Paine's pamphlet, little is actually known. In terms of circulation, we know only the number of copies printed in a very small number of the early Philadelphia editions. Several anecdotal accounts indicate that Robert Bell's initial printing of 1,000 copies sold out in a week and that he immediately put out a second edition that was at least as large as the first.²⁸ Paine, who was angry with Bell for not consulting him before going to press a second time, then went to another publisher—William and Thomas Bradford—to bring out a new authorized and extended edition. Entrepreneurially alert, the Bradfords quickly contracted the printing work to two local printers who each put out 3,000 copies within several weeks.²⁹ But before the Bradfords could produce their version, the original printer, Bell, had capitalized enormously. Benjamin Franklin alone bought 100 copies from Bell, while Robert Aitken ordered two dozen for his bookstore on 10 January, two dozen more on 15 January, another dozen on 17 January, and two dozen more on 22 January.³⁰ This proliferation, however, didn't stop the new printers, the Bradfords, from selling a large number themselves when their new "extended" edition came out, and several other Bradford editions soon followed. In all, sixteen Philadelphia editions came out—nine from Bell, six from the Bradfords, and one German edition from Steiner and Cist. But even within these certainties, key questions remain. How many copies were produced in each edition? Were later editions smaller, as local markets approached saturation? How many copies of these early editions were shipped to England?³¹ And in the case of the competing Bell and Bradford editions (which are, in fact, quite different texts), did some readers buy both printers' versions, perceiving each as distinct commodities?³²

In the end, massive print runs are most likely to have occurred at the site of origin. Philadelphia was Anglo-America's largest city, the seat of American Enlightenment, and the largest book producer in the British colonies. James Warren's 1776 testimony about *Common Sense*—in which he thanks Elbridge Gerry for sending a copy of the “Pamphlet which has made so much noise to the Southward”—initially reads like evidence of the pamphlet's cross-regional, seamlessly unifying impact from New England to Georgia.³³ Writing, however, from Plymouth, Massachusetts, Warren was actually referring to the “noise” the pamphlet had made in Philadelphia. This stir, though local in origin, is hardly inconsequential to the book's later legend, for the myth of its general success throughout the colonies was directly enabled by its timely, and highly distinctive, appearance in prefederal Philadelphia. No other city in the colonies had Philadelphia's production, marketing, or distribution capacity on the eve of the Revolution, nor could any other city approach the same level of demand for the pamphlet that political Philadelphia, site of the ongoing Continental Congress, was able to generate.³⁴ Philadelphia, with its high concentration of printers, its literate urban audience, and its strategic location for trade and transport, was specially poised to create a big book.

But even Philadelphia had its limits. Because of the radically decentralized nature of preindustrial printing, the city's publishers never had more than fragmentary access to the rest of the continent—access made more limited by the wintertime conditions that accompanied the early months of the pamphlet's reception. Because no commercial network already existed through which the book could circulate, no single printer could capitalize on the success of *Common Sense*. Even Bell, who through an aggressive marketing campaign probably sold more copies than any other printer in the colonies, was not prepared to supply massive demand outside of Philadelphia, where other printers, following the familiar, dispersed pattern of the colonial book trade, printed their own copies for local distribution. These reprintings, however, came out much more slowly than Paine's boast of early April would suggest, and a number of lags in dissemination are reflected in extant advertisements for various editions.³⁵ Closely linked to New York via an express mail corridor, *Common Sense*'s early dissemination was probably quickest and most complete on the Philadelphia-to-New York axis and in counties directly surrounding Philadelphia. Distribution, however, along more far-flung parts of the post route was only as reliable as the eighteenth-century mails—which, if we credit the per-

vasive anxiety expressed in surviving correspondences about postal miscarriages, was not very reliable at all.³⁶

While it's true, furthermore, that the pamphlet was vividly in view in and around 1776 Philadelphia, it wasn't just the pamphlet's genius, or the self-evidence of the truths it articulates, that produced that visibility. Paine's commercial dispute with Bell was, in many ways, as crucial to the book's celebrity as were its arguments for independence. Not only did this debate ensure, quite apart from the issue of demand, that twice the number of copies would be printed in Philadelphia (one set by Bell and one set by the Bradfords), but it also made the book a kind of local scandal whose fifteen minutes of fame lasted several months as Bell (at his own expense) and Bradford (at Paine's expense) repeatedly displayed dueling full-page advertisements in opposite columns of the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, each making claims not for or against independence but for or against the characters of the locally identifiable disputants. Thus, *Common Sense* was, over the course of its first few months, often the topic of a full four of the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*'s eight columns (or two of the paper's four pages), but only half of this coverage actually involved political debate.

The visibility generated by this quarrel undoubtedly boosted local circulation, and Richard Gimbel—the great twentieth-century bibliographer of *Common Sense*—speculates that the feud made Paine's book “the most discussed and widely circulated pamphlet in America.”³⁷ In making such a claim, however, Gimbel makes a problematic generalization, suggesting that the known history of (a quite distinctive and essentially urban) part of early U.S. culture can stand in for the unknown histories of other parts, almost in the way that republican forms of representation allow one man to stand in for many others through an elective process. But a city is not a senator (it cannot, like a man, move from place to place). Nor does this generalization account for the significant geographic and political diversity of early U.S. “cities,” or towns. If there remains, then, an occluded narrative in the history of this book, it would be the story of how and why *Common Sense* finally got out of Philadelphia and spread through the scattered print cultures that ultimately did reproduce and consume it.

History of course has retained and fetishized a solution to this problem in its well-known account of Paine's pamphlet as a protoliberal meteor, the first American bestseller. Yet the laissez-faire model of continental transmission is inconsistent not just with the state of the

early U.S. economy and the structure of early print culture but also with what little we know about the pamphlet's actual production and consumption within the local economies in which it circulated.

How, then, to account for what surely was, for an American imprint, an astonishingly high degree of continental drift? The pattern of known transmissions out of Philadelphia suggests that *Common Sense* was not the work of natural forces nor of the disinterested hand of an already free market so much as the work of a handful of Philadelphians—a calculated act of promotion in which the logic of partiality has simply been repressed. Less a spontaneous than an engineered phenomenon, Paine's pamphlet is most accurately understood as an object that was knowingly dispersed to such populations as would make use of it, a tool deployed within those established systems of deferential custom that, despite the coming reorganization of American life, continued to frame almost every version of social relations in late-eighteenth-century America—from political culture to book selling to the scene of revolution itself. Indeed, Paine's status as a newly arrived British immigrant made him the perfect transitional object through which a number of radical Whigs might express their own still unstated preferences for separation in a way that both tested and shaped public opinion. Propaganda in the strictest sense of the word, the pamphlet has its traceable source in a handful of men who had themselves already decided that separation was the answer to the Anglo-American problem but who were unwilling to attach their names to this position in any public way because they were, in effect, what Paine (the British émigré) was not: insiders who were dependent on their own local communities—both the home communities they had come to Philadelphia to represent and that new Philadelphia community they called the Continental Congress (which made them twice dependent). Several of these men were Congressional delegates but others were local characters with no Congressional affiliation, or continental standing, at all. These men—beginning with Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin but eventually extending to a larger group (including Samuel Adams, James Wilson, and David Rittenhouse)—were responsible for getting Paine to write the pamphlet in the first place, for arranging to have Robert Bell print it, for retitling it “Common Sense” when Paine preferred “Plain Truth,” and for finally spreading it through their home constituencies.³⁸

This theory makes sense of a problem that the myth of the best-

seller simply denies: the regional partiality of the book's dissemination. It's hardly a coincidence that the line between pro- and anti-*Common Sense* colonies was drawn most starkly in the same terms in which it was daily articulated on the Congressional floor—a sharp line that divided New Englanders (who had perhaps suffered the most at British hands) from southerners (who retained a disproportionate number of trade and cultural relations with the metropole even after the onset of armed conflict). As its delegates undoubtedly knew, the North was ready to receive and retransmit the message of *Common Sense* in a way that the southern colonies were not. Thus, when Congressional delegates from Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire sent small numbers of copies back to their hometowns, they didn't need to pressure anybody to have the pamphlet reprinted; instead, the book followed an obvious path from post rider to private recipient, making the expected interim stop in the hands of the local printer (who was usually also the local postmaster), who either commandeered a copy for himself, copied all or parts of it long-hand, or set it in type before sending it on to its rightful owner.

In the South, on the other hand, the pamphlet's dissemination was far more spotty and problematic. Even Jefferson (for many years a Paine ally), tended to deemphasize the pamphlet's impact:

. . . [A]t the annual election in April 1776, a convention for the year was chosen. Independence, and the establishment of a new form of government, were not even yet the objects of the people at large. One extract from the pamphlet called *Common Sense* had appeared in the Virginia papers in February, and copies of the pamphlet itself had got in a few hands. But the idea had not been opened to the mass of the people in April, much less can it be said that they had made up their minds in its favor.³⁹

Jefferson's account is corroborated by the sparse surviving records of southern transmissions and reprints. In the Tidewater states, the pamphlet was seemingly disseminated more as a curiosity than as an item of propaganda to be reproduced. In February 1776, for instance, Thomas Nelson sent two dozen copies to Jefferson at Monticello, who apparently did nothing with them.⁴⁰ One used copy was also mailed from Philadelphia in February by an unknown sender to the planter John Page. Sitting in the post office at Williamsburg, this lone copy was waylaid by John Pinckney, publisher of the *Virginia Gazette*, who

copied short passages longhand and published them in his paper over the next few days.⁴¹ Passing up the opportunity to put his own edition in print, Pinckney likely knew the climate in which such arguments would be received—or the lack of readers willing to buy such an object. The only further mention of Paine’s text in the succeeding months came not (as in New England) in the form of advertisements for either locally produced or imported copies but in the form of essays by the anti-*Common Sense* editorialist Cato, the Tory critic who first prompted Paine to coin the number “one hundred and twenty thousand.”⁴²

In the deep South, the pamphlet evoked more negative responses. The first known transmission south of Virginia came in the form of several copies hand-carried to South Carolina by Congressional delegate Christopher Gadsden when he returned south in February to participate in his colony’s Provincial Congress. When Gadsden tried to read pieces of Paine’s argument on the floor during debate, he was immediately denounced.⁴³ While some of Gadsden’s copies eventually spread to other readers in South Carolina and, finally, to Savannah, Georgia, no southern printer reproduced the pamphlet except David Bruce of Charleston. Not surprisingly, the pamphlet’s unpopularity troubled radical southern Whigs who had seen its effects in Philadelphia and heard of its success (through Congressional colleagues) in the Northeast. John Penn of North Carolina, perhaps realizing that the extremely underresourced and conservative North Carolina press would probably not put out an edition of its own, arranged to have a “Waggonload” sent to Edenton for the Committees for Correspondence to distribute to its members. Road conditions were so bad between Philadelphia and North Carolina, however, that Penn and his fellow delegate Joseph Hewes had to arrange to “put five horses on the Waggon” and in the end could only “hope they [would] be delivered safe.”⁴⁴ No further mention is made in either man’s correspondence of the fate of that winter wagon, but it’s clear that local conditions throughout the South—including apathy, conservatism, lack of resources, notoriously difficult travel conditions, and a dispersed and often illiterate population—all converged to dampen the impact of Paine’s monumentalizing arguments there.

In the end, then, we do know where the pamphlet was reprinted, and we know that the history of those reprintings is more spotty than the myth of the bestseller would allow. It is impossible, however, to

know the size of each known print run or the inevitable variations in local demand from site to site. In New York and perhaps parts of New England, editions were very likely almost as large (although they were never nearly as numerous) as the Philadelphia editions. But even in the densely literate enclaves of rural New England and the well-settled towns of the middle colonies, the book business was, from 1775 forward, routinely disrupted. In a scene made familiar by battle and British occupation, printers from Albany to Boston to Newport buried their presses and waited out the war, often leaving settled print cultures deprived of their usual production sites.⁴⁵ Even towns that maintained their presses during the war contended with labor and supply crises. Large parts of New England, greatly affected by the presence of British troops and the consequences of blockades, suffered colony-wide shortages of paper throughout the early months of 1776.⁴⁶ In Newport, Rhode Island, the local printer, Solomon Southwick, wanted to bring out an edition of *Common Sense* but he likewise battled a shortage of both workers and supplies, as he had for years before the Revolution.⁴⁷ Having received a few copies of Paine's pamphlet through the post, Southwick printed a public apology to his customers early in February, claiming that the shortage of rags in Rhode Island (which made it difficult to make paper) would preclude him from producing anything other than extracts in the local newspaper. When he did finally get an edition out, it was a partial reprinting (undoubtedly small), followed later by another partial edition, which is actually a continuation of where the first one left off.⁴⁸ Given the pervasiveness of such material pressures even in what were then (relatively) large-scale colonial economies, it seems all the more unlikely that smaller towns like Andover or resource-poor Charleston would have put out massive, Philadelphia-sized editions.

Even Boston, historically an important book publishing center, must be brought into localist perspective because so many Bostonians (and their outlying neighbors) had fled south to Philadelphia or New York with the advent of fighting at Lexington and Concord. Boston's hard times in 1775 forced Isaiah Thomas to move his presses out of town (in the middle of the night) to outlying Worcester, where he continued to publish his *Massachusetts Spy*. The publishers of the *Boston Gazette* likewise shifted to Watertown, Massachusetts, for the entirety of 1776, a wise move given that the publication schedule of every other Boston paper was seriously disrupted throughout the rest of the year,

with one paper issuing printed apologies through the early months of 1776 for its disrupted service to subscribers in outlying areas. One Salem printer's resources were so strained that he used the title page of his edition of *Common Sense* to apologize "for the poor quality of the paper, owing to the scarcity of rags."⁴⁹ Such travails suggest the chaotic scene of late 1770s New England, both in terms of troubled production and disrupted dissemination—problems that suggest that Boston lacked the resources and labor (not to mention the stable reading public) that might have produced the spectacularly large runs that had marked Philadelphia editions.⁵⁰

In the end, nobody knows or can know just how many copies of *Common Sense* were printed or sold—nor such things as whether printed copies were primarily purchased through commercial venues or given away through acts of sentimental or deferential exchange, for whom they were printed (when printed), by whom they were read (when read), or how many multiple readers may have come into contact with any single copy. In citing large circulation numbers, nineteenth-century historians clearly relied on Paine's own account of the pamphlet's success, and they may also have been impressed by the large number of times Continental delegates mentioned the pamphlet in letters home—though such mention does not in itself indicate anything so much as the pamphlet's high visibility in Philadelphia. If one looks beyond Paine himself and the letters of invested Congressional delegates, archival evidence for *Common Sense*'s massive cross-continental impact is difficult to locate.⁵¹ The printers' records that might reconstruct a definitive account of its dissemination were either not kept at all or, if kept in any systematic way, are now lost. In the face of such archival gaps, all we can do is imagine the book's importance. But even if we imagined that every single American edition of *Common Sense* was printed in a bestselling Philadelphia-like batch of 3,000 (and this is simply impossible, since we already know that not even every Philadelphia edition was this large), its circulation would not have exceeded 75,000, and a more likely estimate would, I suspect, be lower.⁵² And while 75,000 is still a very large number, it does not really meet or exceed the vastness and variety of the early American population. There were three million people living in Anglo-America in 1776, most of them scattered on farms. Is it likely that "every American able to read, had read 'Common Sense'"? And what about the ones who couldn't read?

This is the problem with Paine. On one hand, *Common Sense* must be recognized as a novel print phenomenon—a pamphlet that, though not nearly as ubiquitous as the standard almanac, was far more successful than similar artifacts of its day. On the other hand, its success can and should be qualified by a better material understanding of how it was produced and how it was likely to have circulated. We can't say—because we can't prove—that *Common Sense* did or did not sell a specific number of copies, but we can begin to question how much purchase the notion of the runaway “bestseller” can hold in eighteenth-century (protocapitalist but preindustrial) terms.⁵³ The bestseller as a cultural form is simply anachronistic to the particular moment of U.S. economic development in which *Common Sense* was produced, the material conditions of which could not have sustained anything approaching the mass-market status so often accorded Paine's pamphlet. If they could have, it would be reasonable to assume that more such bestsellers would have followed. But as numerous historians note when they describe *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as *Common Sense*'s second coming (a second civic blockbuster), more such bestsellers did not follow—for almost a hundred years.

In America, the Book Is King

How did printed texts, about which we actually know so little, come to be part of such a pervasive national myth? Why is Paine, rather than Revere, the more iconic (always national, never provincial) figure of 1776? Even if particular texts were not as popular as many histories claim, it is clear that print culture was crucial to the historical processes of founding. But one possibility that critics of the early republic have yet to explore is that books may have been central to U.S. founding not in spite of but because they were local and thus limited in both production and circulation. In early U.S. culture, in other words, the *idea* of the bestseller was able to do just as much work for founding as an actual bestseller could. Indeed, I would argue that *Common Sense* was just the first of many founding documents whose primary purpose was, from the beginning, to repress the dispersed and fragmentary conditions of its own production—a text that fantasized, through the figure of its own widely heralded circulation, an original unity that could be translated across a proliferating set of locales before the war was won or the union formed.

In one of *Common Sense*'s more famous moments, Paine struggles with just this problem—the vexed integrity of the cross-continental founding he proposes:

But where says some is the King of America? I'll tell you Friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the Royal Brute of Britain. Yet that we may not appear to be defective even in earthly honors, let a day be solemnly set apart for proclaiming the charter; let it be brought forth placed on the divine law, the word of God; let a crown be placed thereon, by which the world may know, that so far as we approve of monarchy, that in America THE LAW IS KING. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law *ought* to be King; and there ought to be no other. But lest any ill use should afterwards arise, let the crown at the conclusion of the ceremony be demolished, and scattered among the people whose right it is.⁵⁴

Paine imagines the revolution made legitimate here not in the theoretical language of either liberalism or classical republicanism (because it is either just or virtuous to do so) but in the form of a spectacle centered on material objects: a holy book, a charter, and a crown—the last of which can, after a rite that collapses all three, be broken into pieces and dispersed “among the people,” much as a printed text is reproduced and disseminated to consensus-constituting majorities in many of our text-based myths of founding. Michael Warner has used this passage to indicate how the Constitution later established its own legitimacy through the very condition of its printedness, which, in his account, allowed it “to emanate from no one in particular, and thus from the people.”⁵⁵ But I am less concerned here with the discursive uses of print—including its patently fabricated claim to non-particularity—than with the interplay between such discursive constructions of abstraction and the challenge perpetually posed to them through the actual embodiment of material texts, living actors, geographical space, and everyday life. To the degree that printed texts—like Paine's pamphlet, or later, the Constitution—are able to solve key problems in modern political economy (and ideologically there can be no doubt that they do just this), it is not solely because they emanate from no place, or no one, in particular, but because they have the peculiar ability to be both particular and nonparticular at once. We might say that every book has, like the King before it, two bodies—

one that is present in the form of a reliably fixed, real, and always self-identical material text and the other that is promised by its endlessly reproducible, presumably identical, counterparts, which are to be diffused evenly, as in Paine's drama, among "the people whose right it is."⁵⁶ Both a thing capable of being held in one reader's hands and something that could potentially be everywhere else at the same time, the book becomes both an object under local control and a sign for the democratic work being done elsewhere—an icon of egalitarian diffusion, circulation, and exchange among Enlightened citizens of the (American) world.

This is an essentially postcolonial fantasy, in which a democratic totem is invoked to disperse authority across geographical space rather than allowing it to remain condensed, metropolitan-fashion, in a capital—or a king. In suggesting that such work must be done in order to make U.S. founding legitimate and in later offering up *Common Sense* to do it, Paine sought to reorganize the colonial periphery into the kind of densely privileged center that would, in future years, prove exceptionally functional to market transformation (and that would, ironically, simply invent new peripheries at the new nation's edges and throughout its exteriors). While any well-circulated object could theoretically reorganize space in just this way (and today, many different ones do), Paine's text was, in 1776, peculiarly effective. As one of few *speaking* objects available to early American publics, the freestanding political pamphlet, or manifesto, bears an explicitly stated politics in a way that newspapers and magazines (as miscellanies containing multiple points of view) do not. Indeed, Paine himself insisted that the essay be produced as a freestanding pamphlet rather than having it serially reprinted in newspapers, objecting to the latter plan because he could not get them generally inserted in newspapers everywhere.⁵⁷ In doing so, Paine mobilized both ends of the dialectic, a fantasy of fixed reality as well as one of dispersed generality. On one hand, he believed he had maintained authorial control over the material text by (seeming to) control all the potential sites of the book's production; on the other, he produced a far more imaginary relation to the potential vastness of its implied but unverifiable dissemination. The fantasy of a widely circulated *Common Sense* thus worked from the outset to naturalize the not-yet-realized nation and to nationalize Paine's chosen sign for it (the book), figuring the territorial frontier of its imagined community as an imagined market zone in which a freely circulating

commodity (explicitly cited as a bestseller) was repeatedly invoked as the key instrument in securing nationalist affect.

But the myth of the bestseller was not just useful two centuries ago. It remains crucial to the ways we recall and sustain a belief in the legitimate origins of democratic consent, even today. Most notably, *Common Sense* continues to authorize the nongrounded juridical act of independence itself within a popular narrative that demonstrates its sovereign origins in the “minds of the people,” who, according to Lodge, agreed to the premises behind independence even though they remained inarticulate—or “dumb”—until Paine spoke their thoughts for them.⁵⁸ The myth of the bestseller thus enables that most democratic of fictions—the belief that all the people were (or could be) equally present at the scene of their subjection, all interested and invested readers in a common culture of consent. By helping later generations dissociate the scene of Revolution from its own fragmented origins, the myth of *Common Sense* does for our own sense of founding exactly what Paine’s arguments claim to be dismantling for the eighteenth-century monarchy: it lends legitimacy to murky origins. As one of the inaugural acts of the political American Enlightenment, the legend of *Common Sense* works the same way that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have suggested that the Enlightenment worked more generally—as an emphatic reenchantment of ancient institutions for modern purposes. The figure of the book simply replaces that of the King and does work in the process that this medieval figure, fixed by the limits of his own mortality, could never do.⁵⁹ While the book fails to actually solve the problem of popular participation and consent, it nevertheless mines a fantasy of generality over and through one of fixity in a way that no (singular) sovereign could ever hope to do—while at the same time dispensing with the issue of biological succession by remaining self-identical, not just across territorial space but through generations of time as well. In this way, the myth of the early national bestseller continues to speak to and for modern citizens in a way that solves many problems for them. In figuring the Revolution as a populist spectacle not unlike the one Paine himself imagines within *Common Sense*, we have secured in perpetuity our own will-to-founding, which must always really be an (impossible) will to-have-been-founded in order to actually serve the purposes of national legitimation.

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Notes

- 1 On voice or print in the construction of the United States, see Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996); Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1993); Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, for Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture [Williamsburg, Virginia], 2000); Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990); and Larzer Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1991). In general, Looby, Fliegelman, and Gustafson theorize voice, presence, and embodiment over and against printed mediation while Warner and Ziff emphasize the hegemony of print over embodiment.
- 2 The literature on the importance of print to the patriot movement is vast. Classic arguments include Arthur Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764–1776* (1958; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1965); and Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Rebellion: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1764–1776* (New York: Knopf, 1972). See also Warner's and Ziff's more recent revisions (*Letters* and *Writing the New Nation*, respectively).
- 3 The only extended account of the publication history of *Common Sense* is Richard Gimbel's introduction to *Thomas Paine: A Bibliographic Check List* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1956), 15–57. Though useful, Gimbel's bibliography never accounts for the pamphlet's dissemination out of Philadelphia.
- 4 See Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1863* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).
- 5 Howard Zinn, "Pamphleteering in America," in *Artists in Times of War* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 93–94.
- 6 Henry Cabot Lodge, *The Story of the Revolution* (New York: Scribner's, 1898), 154.
- 7 There are more skeptical accounts, but they are rare and contradictory, as in John C. Miller's claim that "*Common Sense* was without a doubt a potent force for independence" that "opened the eyes of thousands of Americans to the realities of British politics" but whose "effect, a patriot observed, was 'trifling compared with the effects of the folly, insanity and villainy of the King and his Ministers'" (*Origins of the American Revolution* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1948], 476). The "patriot" cited here is the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 7 March 1776, which was likely responding with skepticism to Paine's own recent claims for the pamphlet in his Forester essays.

- 8 Thomas R. Adams, introduction to *American Independence: The Growth of an Idea* (New Haven: Jenkins and Reese, 1980), xi.
- 9 Ibid., xi–xii, xi.
- 10 The eighteenth-century British book trade was centralized in London, serving a more massive market than anything American publishing could have coordinated until the rise of the railroad in the nineteenth century, which reorganized the American book industry on a much more centralized model (see Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital: Philadelphia Book Publishers in the New Republic* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996], 40). Eighteenth-century London editions of *Common Sense* far outnumber all American editions combined: there were thirty-five editions published in London alone between 1776 and 1800 as opposed to the twenty-eight editions published throughout all of the United States. In addition, American markets were much more quickly saturated than the British market. While American printers produced only three post-1776 editions of the pamphlet, London printers continued to produce new editions steadily well into the nineteenth century. For a comprehensive account of colonial print culture, see Hugh Armory and David D. Hall, eds., *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).
- 11 See Gimbel, *Thomas Paine*. Although presses continued to operate throughout the Revolutionary War in Quebec, Montreal, Halifax, and Shelburne (Nova Scotia), no edition of *Common Sense* ever issued with a Canadian imprint. Although Maine and Vermont had burgeoning populations in 1776, there was no press to serve them (except more southern or eastern New England presses) until Vermont was declared independent and hired a government printer in 1778 (see *The Revolution Downeast: The War for American Independence in Maine* [Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1993]; Douglass C. McMurtrie, *The Royalist Printers at Nova Scotia* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1933]; Marie Tremaine, ed., *Canadian Book of Printing: How Printing Came to Canada* [Toronto: Toronto Public Libraries, n.d.]; Marcus A. McCorison, ed., *Vermont Imprints, 1778–1820* [Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1963]; and R. Webb Noyes, *A Bibliography of Maine Imprints to 1820* [Stonington, Maine: Mrs. and Mr. R. W. Noyes, 1930]). The farthest known western press, meanwhile, was established at New Orleans in 1768. Although copies of *Common Sense* did eventually reach the West Indies and Europe, there is no mention of its availability in the Spanish-ruled regions of Louisiana—or anywhere beyond Lancaster, Pennsylvania (see Douglass C. McMurtrie, *Louisiana Imprints, 1768–1810* [Hattiesburg, Miss.: Book Farm, 1942]; Douglass C. McMurtrie, *Early Printing in New Orleans, 1764–1810* [New Orleans: Searcy and Pfaff, 1929]; and Andrew O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The Ameri-*

- can Revolution and the British Caribbean* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2000], 143).
- 12 According to Philip S. Foner, *Common Sense* “became overnight a best-seller” (introduction to *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 2 vols. [New York: Citadel, 1945], xiv). Moncure Daniel Conway calls *Common Sense* a pamphlet “whose effect has never been paralleled in literary history” (introduction to *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Moncure Daniel Conway, 4 vols. [New York: Putnam, 1894–1908], 1:67).
 - 13 John Fiske, *The American Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 1:187.
 - 14 W. E. Woodward, *George Washington: The Image and the Man* (New York: Liveright, 1946), 282.
 - 15 Lynn Montross, *The Reluctant Rebels: The Story of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), 112.
 - 16 Eric Foner finds 150,000 to be the most common figure, but he seems to agree that the source for most historians’ estimates is Paine: “Paine later claimed *Common Sense* had sold at least 150,000 copies, and most historians have accepted this figure as accurate” (*Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976], 79).
 - 17 “Forester No. II,” *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 10 April 1776; reprinted in Thomas Paine, *Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995), 67.
 - 18 “An Autobiographical Sketch” (prepared for Henry Laurens in the late 1770s), in *Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Conway, 4:431. In the 1790s, Paine modified these numbers again in a brief aside in *The Rights of Man*, claiming that “the demand ran to not less than one hundred thousand copies” (*Collected Writings*, ed. Foner, 605).
 - 19 Paine, *The Rights of Man*, in *Collected Writings*, ed. Foner, 605. There are no extant letters between Paine and printers of *Common Sense*, although correspondence he conducted much later sometimes shows him attempting (unsuccessfully) to control publication of his work. In its Gimbel Collection, the American Philosophical Society holds several pieces of later correspondence between Paine and American newspaper editors discussing his ideas for potential publications that were never realized.
 - 20 Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 320.
 - 21 Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Collected Writings*, ed. Foner, 26.
 - 22 According to Remer, “While commodities such as molasses, tobacco, and humans linked colonial regions, printed matter was not considered a particularly valuable commodity for [interregional] trade” (*Printers and Men of Capital*, 4).
 - 23 James Gilreath, “American Book Distribution,” in *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book: America, 1639–1876*, ed. David D. Hall

- and John B. Hench (Worcester, Mass: American Antiquarian Society, 1987), 111.
- 24 Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*, 17. David Hall similarly argues for the priority of such “local items” as “almanacs and Bibles,” adding that “[t]he leading Virginia printer-bookseller was issuing 6,000 almanacs a year” while “a *single* northern almanac had annual sales of 50,000 copies” (“Books and Reading in Eighteenth-Century America,” in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson et al. [Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1994], 363–64).
 - 25 See Arthur Shaffer, *The Politics of History: Writing the History of the American Revolution, 1783–1815* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1975), 32–35 and 174–75.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, 174.
 - 27 As Gordon Wood has argued, the nationalist archive being produced and drawn on in these years was naturally a partial one, favoring not the reality of the Revolution but the rhetoric of its victors (“Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 23 [January 1966]: 3–32).
 - 28 See A. Owen Aldridge, *Thomas Paine’s American Ideology* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1984), 41; and Robert Ferguson, “Writing the Revolution,” in *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Volume I: 1590–1820*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 456.
 - 29 See Aldridge, *Thomas Paine’s American Ideology*, 41.
 - 30 On Benjamin Franklin’s purchase, see Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Viking, 1938), 548. The source for Robert Aitken’s purchase is his “Wastebook,” now in the Library Company of Philadelphia, one of the few extant records of actual orders for *Common Sense*; see Gimbel, *Thomas Paine*, 17. Aitken was a friend of Franklin and a well respected Philadelphia Whig. His popular bookstore probably provided members of the Continental Congress with their first copies of the pamphlet.
 - 31 Printer’s hiatuses—the practice of removing vulgar words and replacing them with a dash—are usually an indication that an edition was meant, in part, for London or Dublin consumption. Several of the early Philadelphia editions possess such hiatuses, which are rarely found in imprints bound for American audiences. For a complete list of editions with hiatuses, see the “Collation and Notes” column of Gimbel’s bibliographical checklist (*Thomas Paine*, 63–112).
 - 32 The Bradford edition includes Paine’s new appendix on the Quakers, expressly produced in an attempt to deny Robert Bell (the original printer) an authoritative edition to reprint. Bell, however, found his own solution to this in issuing what he called a “complete edition” that not only pirated Paine’s appendix on the Quakers but added six other items (by

- other authors) as well. There's no doubt that these two enlarged editions reached large numbers of new readers in Philadelphia and outlying areas. It's also likely, however, that they earned each printer repeat buyers who had bought the original printing but sought to read the new material added here.
- 33 James Warren to Elbridge Gerry, March 1776, quoted in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, ed. William Bell Clark, 10 vols. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 4:213.
 - 34 See Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 73.
 - 35 Newspaper mentions of *Common Sense* suggest a timeline for the pamphlet's spread northward that does not match well with the date of Paine's estimate. Numerous advertisements, for instance, describe the pamphlet as being "in the press" or on sale as of February in New York and the lower New England colonies (Connecticut and Rhode Island) but not until mid- to late April in more northern New England towns; see, for example, *New Hampshire Packet*, 19 April, 26 April, and 10 May 1776.
 - 36 For an account of the deplorable state of the post road on the eve of the Revolution, see Hugh Finlay, *Journal Kept by Hugh Finlay* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: F. H. Norton, 1867).
 - 37 Gimbel, *Thomas Paine*, 49. Gimbel's is the best account of the advertising war that followed Paine's break with Bell. Paine describes his side of the argument in "An Autobiographical Sketch" (see *Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Conway, 4:430–31).
 - 38 On Paine's various Philadelphia patrons, see Aldridge, *Thomas Paine's American Ideology*, 36–37.
 - 39 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), 122.
 - 40 See Thomas Nelson to Thomas Jefferson, 4 February 1776, in volume 3 of *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789*, ed. Paul H. Smith (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976–), 194.
 - 41 See the catalog compiled by William J. Van Schreeven, in *The Time for Decision, 1776*, volume 6 of *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, ed. Robert L. Scribner (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1973–83), 284.
 - 42 Brief extracts of *Common Sense* appear in the *Virginia Gazette* on 2 February and then again on 5 April 1776. The *Gazette* later published, throughout April and May, the anti-*Common Sense* Cato letters numbered 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7; but it published none of Paine's Forester responses. The paper also ran the first number of the anti-*Common Sense* Cassandra on 25 May 1776. The *Virginia Gazette* also includes an advertisement on 9 March for hundreds of available books that does not include *Common Sense*.
 - 43 On the pamphlet's reception in South Carolina, see Jerome Nadlehaft,

The Disorders of War: The Revolution in South Carolina [Orono: Univ. of Maine at Orono Press, 1981], 9–10).

- 44 Joseph Hewes to Samuel Johnston, 20 February 1776, in volume 3 of *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 289–90.
- 45 On the flight of Albany's (Tory) Robertson brothers, for example, see McMurtrie, *The Royalist Printers at Nova Scotia*, 4.
- 46 For one instance of paper shortage, see an announcement by the provincial government printed in the *Essex Journal and New Hampshire Packet*, 23 February 1776, calling on committees of correspondence throughout the colony to organize citizens to collect rags for local paper mills "to promote the public good."
- 47 Solomon Southwick's itinerant career in these years reflects the persistence but also the chaos of New England print culture during the war; see Clarence Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690–1820* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1947), 998.
- 48 These two editions are counted in *Common Sense* lore as separate editions (making up two of the twenty-five known North American editions). Their text, however, constitutes a single rendering of the essay, printed in two consecutive batches that clearly served a single reading audience.
- 49 See the title page of Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Salem: Ezekial Russell, 1776).
- 50 For an account of the troubles faced by Boston-area printers throughout the Revolution—including the troubled partnership of Edes and Gill (major printers of *Common Sense*)—see Benjamin Franklin Bache V, *Boston Printers, Publishers, and Booksellers: 1640–1800* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980).
- 51 *Common Sense* is not cited as much as one might expect in Revolutionary diaries and memoirs. Of thirty-five diaries that I consulted from various regions (the dates of which cover some or all of the first half of 1776), only four mention *Common Sense*; see *Extracts from the Diary of Christopher Marshall*, ed. William Duane (Albany, N.Y.: Munsell, 1877), 57; John Drayton, *Memoirs of the American Revolution As Relating to the State of South Carolina* (New York: New York Times, 1969); *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774–1777* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1968), 136; and *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle* (New York: New York Times, 1969), 39.
- 52 There's no doubt that single copies reached multiple readers (or listeners). But it's also more than likely that individual readers in Philadelphia bought more than one edition (given variations in content between editions), that some copies in Philadelphia were produced for foreign export, and that many copies reached no reader at all. Bell, for one, advertised a stock of 1776 editions as late as 1783, an indication that his final

- printing (or printings) never sold out—whether from oversaturation or lack of timeliness once independence was declared (see Robert Bell, *Just Published and Now Selling, at Bell's Book-Store*. . . . [Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1783]).
- 53 The *Oxford English Dictionary* locates the origins of the word *bestseller* in the late-nineteenth-century United States.
 - 54 Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Collected Writings*, ed. Foner, 34.
 - 55 Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 107–8.
 - 56 On the king's two bodies, see Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957).
 - 57 For Paine's own account of why he wrote *Common Sense* in the way he did, see *The Rights of Man*, in *Collected Writings*, ed. Foner, 605. Notably Paine did not pursue this strategy with *The Crisis*, the fifteen numbers of which were inserted in various newspapers piecemeal rather than being produced as a freestanding pamphlet or as a series of freestanding mini-pamphlets.
 - 58 Lodge, *The Story of the Revolution*, 154–55.
 - 59 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1976), 3–5.

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